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Summary of: Popol Vuh: The Book of the Ancient Maya

The introduction part of the book made it known that this book was one of many attempts at translating what were the original documents written by the ancient Maya based out of Guatemala. These documents were written in the Quiche language. The very first translations of the documents were done by Father Francisco Ximenez who lived among the Quiche during the Spanish conquest. Father Ximenez was trusted by the natives and it said this is how he obtained the original documents. Father Ximenez translated the documents word for word and did not capture the Quiche syntax. The way he wrote his translation was written in a way that was not comprehendible to those who understood Spanish. Since the discovery of Father Ximenez’s translation, many different people from different countries have attempted to translate the “Popol Vuh”. Popol Vuh: The Book of the Ancient Maya, by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus Griswold Morley is also an attempt at translating the documents and was published in 2003.

The documents are estimated to date back to before 1558. The documents are supposed to tell the stories of how Earth was created. The book tells about the Gods and creators of land and man. They go into detail about the Gods and creators’ expectations of the beings they placed on earth. The creators failed several times when creating man and were forced to brutally kill those creatures. Finally, they created four men and later four women to be their wives. Through the stories, they go through events that set the norms for the rest of time. For example, the way people or animals look, the foods animals consume, and the languages of all cohabitants on earth. The stories tell about the lives of the lords and kings for the first five generations of life on Earth. There is much talk of sacrifices which were performed to stay in good terms with the Gods and creators, because one of the main purposes behind the creation of man was to praise and admire the Gods and creators. There are stories of magic and stories of wars. Some kings were described as having magical powers. Sometimes the Gods magically sent aid for wars. In the end, the book gives ample detail in the way the Mayans believed Earth as we know it, came to be about.

The stories were interesting and it is nice to know that the stories in which the Mayans believed in. It is also intriguing how old the original document is and that there is still interest in the documents. Although, I did find it difficult to completely understand what was going on in some of the stories. It seems as though they had many names for one person or place and all of the names are very similar. Overall, some details were a bit puzzling. Most of the stories are farfetched from reality. Although the stories tell about the advancement of civilization in a way that makes sense, I don’t believe the stories are meant to be literal, but to simply portray some of the values and customs through the outcome of each story which always lead to the next.